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ABSTRACT

The problems of underprepared high school graduates and college admissions standards are addressed in a historical context by a Marquette University administrator. The basic skills of listening, speaking, writing, reading, and reasoning have been identified as critical for college work. There has been a lack of consensus on the role of universal, comprehensive secondary schooling and on the relative importance of college preparation to the high school curriculum. Problems of college preparation have been linked to a broader and more complex set of issues, including secondary school finance, the limited influence of unilateral college admission criteria on the rest of education, and the important role of the university that goes beyond defining or measuring the preconditions for excellence in higher studies. Societal needs for college-trained individuals indicates the need for incorporating college requirements into the high school curriculum. It is suggested that restrictions on college admissions will lessen rather than improve the overall academic quality of public education. Colleges need to emphasize that academic excellence is not a fixed criterion or level of performance but an open-ended continuum of ability and output. The press for excellence will be stifled if college doors are closed. (SW)

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TESTIMONY OF

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Submitted to:

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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STATEMENT TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Arnold L. Mitchem
Marquette University
June, 1982

The Problem of Excellence and Basic Skills

The new wave of national attention to excellence in education, as exemplified by the work of this Commission, the College Board's Project Equality, and other similar efforts focused on the high school curriculum and the transition to college, touches deeply the concerns of those of us who are professionally involved in developing higher educational opportunities for historically underrepresented and underserved populations. Too often, in our work with economically and socially disadvantaged individuals in colleges and universities, we encounter students who lack the basic competencies expected for higher education, not from any want of personal ability or drive, but because their formal educational experience and broader socialization have not led to the development of these skills.

Based upon our experience at Marquette University since 1969, the gap between what students are required to do in secondary school and what they need to do in order to prepare for college is wide and obvious. In the state of Wisconsin, for example, a student may earn a high school diploma with only one year of natural science, one year of mathematics, and three years of English instruction. Our entrance requirements for professional programs at Marquette University are stronger, of course. And in recent years, with the help of Marquette's Upward Bound Program, for example, it appears that college preparatory requirements have been articulated somewhat more forcefully to disadvantaged students in the early years of high school. This has improved the academic foundation at least for these students. Nonetheless, most students will graduate from high school without having completed the necessary courses to enter technical or professional college curricula. Or even more tragically, having taken the required secondary coursework, they still find themselves unprepared for the rigorous study of science, history, letters, or mathematics at the college level. This problem is related in part, to the lack of scope and depth in high school instruction in these subjects.

Thus, although some of those students to whom we provide developmental services may have serious limitations in linguistic competence, we find for the most part that their performance in writing falls well below their potential as expressed, for instance, in oral presentation. Accordingly, our major task in preparing these disadvantaged students for college work has been to stimulate their involvement with writing far and above what they normally experience in high school, and to present them with challenges that are typically reserved for an academic elite. We have found that only when students are trying consistently to perform at or near their limits of capacity can we seriously begin to sharpen their academic skills.

As compensatory educators in higher education, we share these concerns with a wide range of postsecondary institutions. It is noteworthy that the dialogues sponsored by the College Board's Project Equality among selective, academic colleges and universities and among "open door," urban institutions elicited a single set of basic academic competencies which define the preparation that all college-bound students should have regardless of the type of institution they plan to attend. These basic skills--the skills of listening, speaking, writing, reading, and reasoning--are fundamentally the same as those which educational opportunity programs and learning skills centers have identified for years as most critical for the development of disadvantaged students in higher education.[1]

High School Curricula and College Skills

There appears, then, to be substantial consensus regarding the skills which are essential for higher learning. Although this consensus may not have been very well defined or clearly specified, what is clear is that much of the same list of "mental disciplines" might have been generated at the turn of the century, when high schools were the province of a few. It seems unlikely that secondary educators would seriously disagree about the nature of college preparation. There has been considerable lack of consensus, in contrast, on the role of universal, comprehensive secondary schooling and on the relative importance of college preparation to the high school curriculum. It may come as a shock to some higher educators that high schools in many communities are not exclusively, or even primarily, concerned with preparing good matriculants for college. Nor is this phenomenon restricted to racial and linguistic minorities. The same high school which has historically had the lowest Black and Hispanic enrollments in the City of Milwaukee has traditionally operated on the realistic assumption that most of its seniors would graduate into foundries or assembly plants. Urban high school counselors in such an environment will be satisfied if not astounded when one out of three or four graduates goes on to college.

As secondary education has been extended to more and more of the population, the development of high school curricula has been influenced both by the constraints of school resources and by the demands of the economic marketplace. Although the expansion of public schooling is a dominant theme in American educational history, near-universal secondary education is a comparatively recent achievement. Not until midcentury did the high school diploma become the clear norm of attainment for all citizens.[2] Accompanying this expansion was a profound reconsideration of the secondary curriculum in preparing students for a wide variety of life roles. At a time when perhaps a fifth of the population were expected to enter college, the comprehensive high school sought to combine the functions of a traditional academy with those of private trade and technical apprenticeships.

This dilution of the high school curriculum in relation to college standards was not principally a function of lower admissions requirements in higher education. While college admissions practices had some obvious influence on the high schools, the democratization of secondary education preceded that most recent democratization of higher education which began with the GI Bill.

Thus, higher educational leaders could support and defend diversified high school curricula without having to reconsider the meritocratic ideals of the university. James Bryant Conant saw no inherent contradiction between the comprehensive high school which was designed to prepare large numbers of students for careers not requiring higher education, on the one hand, and an elitist, stratified system of higher education on the other. Nor did he find it difficult to reconcile either premise with a firm and passionate belief in equal educational opportunity. The emergence of an economic structure which increasingly requires professional or other postsecondary training as a precondition for productive careers has sharpened dilemmas in the transition from high school to college which could be largely glossed over in the 1950s.

The problems, of course, are hardly new. The history of the College Entrance Examination Board illustrates the attempts of higher educational institutions to cope with the changing conditions in secondary education since 1901. Along with those of the people's colleges, the admissions policies of elite universities have evolved in an attempt to maintain a student population compatible with their institutional mission, while at the same time adapting to the realities of precollegiate education. As early as 1890 President Eliot of Harvard, an early advocate of performance-based admissions standards, had complained that

> ...in the present condition of secondary education one-half of the most capable children in the United States, at a moderate estimate, have really no open road to colleges and universities...
>
> Because of the lack of secondary schools competent to prepare their pupils for college, five-sixths of the colleges and universities in the United States maintained preparatory departments, against their will, and in disregard of the interests of the higher instruction.[3]

Thus, even while arguing strongly for a closer match between high school and college requirements, President Eliot was clearly aware that the problems of college preparation were linked to a broader and more complex set of issues, including secondary school finance, that the unilateral admissions criteria of colleges and universities could have only a limited influence on the rest of education, and that the university must assume a much larger and more intricate role than simply defining or measuring the preconditions for excellence in the higher studies.

Open Doors and the Press for Excellence

Using college admissions standards as a club or carrot to improve the quality of secondary education is a persuasively simple idea. Indeed, the increasing societal need for postsecondary training makes it all the more imperative that college requirements be incorporated into the high school curriculum along the lines suggested by Project Equality. But only if it is widely recognized that the option, at least, to pursue higher education must be extended to every American can the carrot of college requirements have any deep or widespread impact on public education. Otherwise the admissions

policies even of less selective colleges and universities will affect only those high schools which already define themselves as educationally elite, and in which graduation to college is the accepted and demanded norm. In the absence of a national--even a cultural--commitment to higher educational opportunity, restrictions on college admissions would have precisely the least impact on the quality of elementary and secondary education received by minority and disadvantaged populations. Those who are already least advantaged would benefit least from such strategies, even though it is their performance which most constrains the level of excellence attained by the schools as a whole.[4]

As John Ogbu observed in Minority Education and Caste, when in the minds of both teachers and students there are few social or economic rewards for academic excellence, no one can be expected to excel.[5] If higher academic admissions standards combined with a decreased availability of student financial aid have the effect of excluding large segments of the population from higher education, or of relegating them to a despised stratum of institutions, we may safely predict a disastrous decline in the overall academic quality of public education. The press for excellence will be quickly stifled if the college door is closed.

Conversely, a full-scale offensive on excellence in education will require the patient and sustained efforts of both government and private institutions, coupled with wise and efficient allocation of resources to critical needs. If the state should require a college preparatory curriculum for all high school graduates, the schools would confront instant teacher shortages in certain fields, especially mathematics and science--or else with the unpleasant alternative of denying the diploma to half of their students. By the same token, radical change in the academic requirements of relatively "open" institutions might be accomplished only at the expense of massive retrenchment in enrollments, resulting in large-scale disruption or dismemberment of the university's human and intellectual resources.

The reality of excellence will not be achieved through semantics or by political fiat. Significant changes in American education require years of diligence and sometime frustration and pain. The positive contributions of some compensatory programs for the disadvantaged are just now coming to light more than a decade after their inception.[6] Yet the strategies and philosophies of successful compensatory programs have never been widely duplicated at the secondary level, and the resource base for elementary and pre-school programs is seriously threatened. Years of research on teaching and learning, much of it sponsored by the federal government, has finally begun to show that schools can indeed improve the performance of their students, and to describe in practical terms how they can do so.[7] Yet it is far from clear who will provide the resources either to sustain further research or to facilitate the use of existing knowledge. More and more creative relationships between private business and both secondary and higher education are urgently needed. But institutional experience shows that such relationships take a long time to develop, even with more than a little patience and understanding on both sides. Painful experience has taught that unguided investment of resources in education will not always pay off. Unfortunately, it has not shown us how to improve education without investing resources.

Keeping Up the Press

Still, it would not be proper or constructive to end on a doomsday note. In times of severe stress, confusion and panic can lead to shortsighted attempts to avoid problems which call for calm and sober reflection upon their root causes. The primary function of selective admissions is not to guarantee student success; nothing can quite accomplish that.[8] Rather, selective admissions in higher education serve to create a hierarchy of institutions which defines one dimension of excellence in higher learning. Admissions processes are far from perfect; most, perhaps, could be substantially improved. It would not be wise, however, to restructure their basic functional role in an attempt to promote reforms in secondary education. Such an attempt would be particularly unwise if it had the effect of punishing the victims of inferior education.

Many leaders of elite higher education, going back at least to Charles William Eliot, have perceived that the very same processes which maintain the hierarchy of institutional quality also threaten to perpetuate an artificial intellectual hierarchy based upon the accidents of social station rather than true ability and character. This insight, along with the social pressures of dispossessed groups seeking meaningful opportunities at all levels of society, has led selective institutions to employ a wider range of alternative admissions criteria which reduce somewhat the importance of test scores and sometimes even previous school performance. Less selective public institutions, on the other hand, have been forced to choose between excluding most members of disadvantaged populations or providing access to these populations while attempting to upgrade their skills. In both cases, the admissions process has been more a hostage of circumstances in primary and secondary education than the reverse.

The paradox of admissions standards stems from an underlying paradox of defining academic excellence according to some fixed criterion or level of performance instead of an open-ended continuum of ability and output. For all the positive contributions of "compentency-based" thinking in education, a fixation on "minimal" or "adequate" or "required" criteria of compentency can unfortunately obscure the process of excellence as a "uniform press upwards," a drive to exceed all previous expectations of performance. This drive to excel, to improve at all levels of performance even to the extent of making old standards obsolete if possible, may be best exemplified in competitive and artistic endeavors. There is no such thing as competency-based basketball, competency-based chess, compentency-based poetry, or competency-based jazz. Although the press for excellence is defined and made real through competition and emulation, it is not confined to the big leagues. At every level of performance, from novice to expert to master, those who are dedicated to excellence share a constant drive to improve through comparing one's own performance with that of appropriate models and through self-criticism and criticism by others.

Each of the basic academic competencies of speaking and listening, writing and reading, reasoning and calculation can be similarly defined along a continuum of excellence at every level of education. In an earlier paper I

characterized the Educational Opportunity Program at Marquette University as practicing what Patricia Cross has called an "Educator's Model" as opposed to a "Remedial Model" of compensatory eduation.[9] In the Marquette approach, there is no separation of the "remedial" from the "real"; regular and special educational programs are coterminous and mutually sustaining. As our Program evolves and grows stronger, we hope that our students will come to perceive their specialized and disciplinary studies as an opportunity to continuously expand, as well as to apply, those basic academic competencies which are addressed more directly in special instruction.

The university's role in developing competency should complement, and not contradict, its disciplinary focus and its emphasis on specialized knowledge. Higher educational institutions should work in whatever way possible to strengthen secondary schooling. But it will not be easy to foster excellence in the high schools through attention to the basic academic competencies unless these same competencies are recognized as the essential agenda of higher learning as well. Even though what President Eliot described as "preparatory departments" may always be necessary, the concern for basic academic skills must also be lifted from the ghetto of "remedial education" and accorded its central role in developing the life of the mind.

Such a reconceptualization of academic excellence would place the process of student selection into a broader context of human development. That elite who will benefit most from higher education, whether in a relatively elitist or a relatively egalitarian setting, consists of those individuals who are willing to dedicate themselves to developing those powers of mind which enable human beings to transcend their immediate circumstances and to take some control of their destiny. If institutions of higher learning can communicate clearly to the secondary schools, and to their students directly, that academic excellence is not a numbers game but a process of hard work and discipline, which demands the ability to endure frustration and disappointment along with a firm but flexible commitment to distant goals, we may indeed begin to have some impact on the quality of secondary schooling which will ease the transition to college for persons of all classes and backgrounds.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]Project Equality, Preparation for College in the 1980s; New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1981. The list of "basic academic compentencies" also includes skills in mathematics and studying.

[2]David Tyack reports that the percentage of 14 to 17 year olds enrolled in secondary schools increased from 51 percent in 1929-30 to 73 percent in 1939-40 and to 83 percent in 1959-60 (Turning Points in American Educational History; Waltham: Blaisdell, 1967, pp. 360-361). Rates of high school completion remained somewhat lower, of course, and the attainment of different minority groups has lagged behind in varying degrees. However, the period of expansion in secondary education began in the 1890s and had influenced conceptions of the curriculum at least by 1920.

[3]Charles W. Eliot, "The Gap Between the Elementary Schools and the Colleges," National Education Association, Journals of Proceedings and Addresses; Topeka: Kansas Publishing House, 1890, pp. 522-523. Tyack also notes that "Eliot... believed that the door to college should be open to everyone to the end of high school and thought that the mental discipline acquired through the academic program would prove valuable whatever the graduate's career." (op. cit., p. 357.)

[4]There is little evidence of any real decline in the school performance of the top one-tenth of the population. It seems, at least, to be generally agreed that the best and the brightest students are more experienced, talented, and well-informed than ever before. This impression is corroborated in part by observing that performance standards for admission to the most selective programs, such as medicine, have in general been rising, rather than declining, in response to changes in the applicant pool.

[5]John V. Ogbu, Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective; New York: Academic Press, 1978.

[6]National Institute of Education, The Effects of Services on Student Development; Washington: Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1977. Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weilcart, Young Children Grow Up: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Project on Youths Through Age 15; Ypsilanti: High/Scope Eduational Research Foundation, Monograph No. 7.

[7]A wide variety of this research was recently surveyed by Donald E. MacKenzie in "Leadership for Learning: What Research Says About Effective Schools"; Washington: National School Boards Association, 1982.

[8]The relationships among skills, selectivity, and retention are again complex. Attrition is indeed a problem in certain selective technical programs. However, research on more advantaged students suggests that the decision to withdraw from engineering programs, for example, may be as much a matter of temperament as a matter of skills. For whatever reasons, attrition from health professional programs is, withsome exceptions, much lower even for "specially" admitted students. Our experience with educational opportunity programs indicates that if the development of college-level skills is an

essential condition of student retention, it still does not guarantee, by itself, that students will persist through a degree. Finally, Alexander Astin's research shows that students in more selective colleges and universities are more likely to persist, irrespective of their individual background characteristics (Preventing College Students from Dropping Out; San Franciscon: Jossey-Bass, 19). Even as they provide one rationale for the preservation of elite institutions, such findings strengthen the argument that even the most rigorous standards need not and should not be rigidly applied.

[9]K. Patricia Cross, "The Elusive Goal of Educational Equality," in Formulating Policy in Postsecondary Education, ed. John F. Hughes and Olive Mills (Washington: American Council on Education, 1975), pp. 195-201. Arnold L. Mitchem, "Balancing Student Retention and Academic Standards," presented to American Council on Education, New Orleans, October 7, 1976.